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STEPHEN BLOOM (Interview #16) His investigation into the Chabad Lubavitcher group in Postville, Iowa
By Stephen Bloom

The Migration to Flyover Country

The story of Postville begins with an unexpected migration of two very different groups of people into the heart of the American Midwest. In 1993, Stephen Bloom, a seasoned journalist who had worked for prestigious outlets like the Los Angeles Times and served as a press secretary in San Francisco, decided to move his family to Iowa for a teaching position. This transition was a profound culture shock, as Bloom moved from a bustling coastal metropolis to what is often colloquially referred to as "flyover country". He found himself in a landscape where the familiar comforts of his Jewish heritage, such as high-quality bagels or lox, were replaced by regional staples like sauerkraut and bratwurst. This personal sense of displacement served as the catalyst for his investigative curiosity when he learned of another group making a similar, yet far more radical, journey.

A group of ultra-Orthodox Chabad Lubavitcher Jews had moved from Brooklyn to Postville, Iowa, to establish a massive kosher slaughterhouse factory. Bloom recognized a parallel between his own family's move and theirs, realizing that if he felt out of place, these deeply traditional and insular people must be experiencing an even more intense clash of cultures. Driven by a desire to make meaning of the world—a task he believes is the fundamental duty of a writer—Bloom set out to document this unique social laboratory. He sought to understand how this group would integrate into a town of 1,200 people, or if they would remain a separate entity entirely.

The Methodology of the Outsider

To capture the reality of Postville, Bloom employed a "bottom-up" journalistic approach, prioritizing the voices of everyday citizens over the town’s power elite. He spent his time interviewing barbers, butchers, bakers, and bartenders, eventually speaking with roughly a third of the town’s population. His goal was to achieve more than just an accurate report; he wanted to reach a "truthful" portrayal of the community's inner workings. To do this, he consciously avoided the use of tape recorders and cameras, which he felt often intimidated subjects and prevented them from speaking naturally. Instead, he relied on rigorous listening and handwritten notes, capturing the essence of conversations rather than a mechanical transcript.

Bloom used a powerful metaphor to describe his role as a journalist in this environment: the woman pinning laundry to a clothesline. He explained that when you are inside a car moving at sixty miles per hour, everything inside seems stationary and normal. The residents of Postville and

the Lubavitcher community were like passengers in that car, too close to the situation to realize how fast they were moving or how much they were changing. Only an observer standing on the side of the road—the journalist—could see the true speed and the impending collision. This perspective allowed him to identify that the town was actually in the midst of a "civil war" that the residents themselves were often unable to fully perceive.

The Theological Wall of Separation

One of the most striking findings of Bloom's investigation was the Lubavitchers' commitment to total social isolation, which they justified through a lens of religious purity. While the local Iowans initially welcomed the newcomers with open arms, expecting a multicultural exchange similar to what they might see on television, the Lubavitchers did not reciprocate. Bloom recounted a pivotal moment when he was walking with his host, Lazer, toward a synagogue. When Bloom greeted two local men repairing a sidewalk with a simple "good morning," Lazer ignored them completely.

When Bloom questioned this lack of neighborly courtesy, Lazer's response was chilling: he stated that to acknowledge the locals was "to welcome a Holocaust". The logic behind this extreme statement was that any social interaction, no matter how small, could lead to children playing together, which would eventually lead to the erosion of their faith and the compromise of their sacred purity. This philosophy of being "separate and above and apart" created a fundamental friction with the local community. While the Iowans were prepared to "bend and bend," the Lubavitchers continued to "take and take," refusing to participate in the shared social or civic life of the town. Bloom found this rejection of basic human connection to be profoundly "anti-American" and antithetical to the democratic values of community integration.

The Shadow of AgriProcessors

The AgriProcessors slaughterhouse stood at the center of the Lubavitcher community's economic power in Postville, but it also became a site of significant moral and legal failure. Bloom's reporting detailed a facility that operated with a blatant disregard for both animal welfare and human rights. He described horrific scenes of animal abuse and unsanitary conditions, which were later corroborated by undercover investigations from PETA. Beyond the treatment of animals, the human cost was equally high, with rampant reports of sexual harassment where female employees were allegedly coerced into sexual favors under the threat of losing their jobs.

The slaughterhouse also became a hub for illegal activities, including drug and gun trafficking. Bloom noted that the facility's reliance on undocumented workers was the "worst-kept secret in Iowa". He observed that anyone, regardless of documentation, could essentially knock on a window and find themselves working on the "kill floor" by the afternoon. Despite the fact that local law enforcement, politicians, and federal agencies were likely aware of these conditions, the geographic isolation of Postville and the political clout of the factory owners delayed intervention for years. Although Bloom's book was published in 2000, and the major federal raids did not occur

until 2008, he pointed out that many of the allegations the government eventually used were first detailed in his investigative work.

The "Aunt Tilly" Analogy and Mainstream Jewish Reaction

The publication of Bloom's book, *Postville*, created a significant rift within the American Jewish community. Initially, many mainstream Jewish organizations and publications were "skittish" about criticizing the Lubavitchers, fearing that condemning a fellow Jewish group would be a betrayal of the family. Bloom used the analogy of "Aunt Tilly" to describe this dynamic. He likened the Lubavitcher group to an elderly relative who begins acting out in public, such as walking around the neighborhood without clothes. Initially, the family tries to hide the behavior and usher her back into her room to protect the family name.

However, there comes a point where the behavior is so public and so dysfunctional that it becomes a relief for the family to finally admit that Aunt Tilly needs professional intervention. Bloom argued that the events in Postville represented that tipping point for mainstream Judaism in America. The actions of the group were so flagrantly "antithetical to American democracy" and so damaging to the reputation of the Jewish faith that silence was no longer an option. Many Jewish people began to realize that the behavior of the Postville group was actually fostering anti-Semitism rather than protecting the faith, and that remaining quiet made them complicit in that outcome.

The Defensive Shield: Accusations of Anti-Semitism

A recurring theme in Bloom’s investigation was the use of anti-Semitism as a "textbook" defensive tactic by the Lubavitcher leadership. Whenever the group or its leaders, such as Shalom Rubashkin, faced legitimate scrutiny or criticism—whether from the EPA, judges, business partners, or journalists—their immediate response was to label the accuser an anti-Semite. This tactic was designed to shut down debate and reduce every factual argument to a question of religious prejudice.

Bloom himself was not immune to these attacks despite his own Jewish identity. Following the release of his book, he faced a campaign of intense hostility. A Lubavitcher publication in Iowa, *The Jewish Spark*, published a full-page editorial urging Bloom to convert to Christianity, asserting that no "true" Jew could have written such a book. They also campaigned for synagogues worldwide to bar Bloom from entry. Bloom recalled a reading in Baltimore where dozens of Lubavitcher men appeared to harass him, creating an atmosphere of intimidation that he compared to the "fatwa" launched against Salman Rushdie. This environment of hostility underscored the group's refusal to engage with the truth of his reporting, preferring instead to attack the messenger.

The Cult of Rubashkin and the Martyr Narrative

At the time of the 2010 interview, the Lubavitcher community had elevated Shalom Rubashkin to a status of martyrdom and even a Messiah-like figure. Despite his conviction on eighty-six counts, the community launched a sophisticated internet campaign to raise funds for his defense and to portray him as a victim of a coordinated anti-Semitic "railroading". This reaction was rooted in a theological mandate within ultra-Orthodox Judaism that requires the community to do whatever is necessary to release a fellow Jew from incarceration.

Bloom linked this mindset to a deeper sense of contempt that some in the group held for non-Jews. He cited a specific criminal case from the early 1990s involving two men associated with the group who went on a crime spree that left a local Christian cashier paralyzed. Bloom argued that this crime was a manifestation of the group's worldview, which often viewed "goyim" or non-Jews as "less of a person". The fact that the victim was not Jewish was central to the lack of remorse or moral conflict surrounding the act. For the Lubavitchers, the world was divided strictly into Jews and everyone else, and the laws of the broader society were often seen as secondary to their own internal dictates.

Faith vs. Religion: A Moral Trajectory

Throughout his time in Postville, Bloom grappled with the distinction between being "religious" and having "faith". He observed that while the Lubavitchers were extremely religious in their adherence to the 613 laws prescribed in the Bible, they seemed to lack a sense of faith defined by shared goodness or a desire to improve the world. He contrasted their inward-looking, fundamentalist world with the Jewish concept of "Tikkun Olam," which mandates the repair and improvement of the world for the benefit of all humanity.

To Bloom, being a "good Jew" is synonymous with being a "good person" and setting an example of integrity and intellectual pursuit. He was profoundly disillusioned by the examples of greed, hypocrisy, and lying that he witnessed among those who claimed to be the "chosen people". He argued that Jewish identity should not be defined solely by the trauma of the Holocaust or a connection to Israel, but by a commitment to the truth and to the magnificence of the human experience. For Bloom, the tragedy of Postville was that a group so focused on their own purity had lost sight of the fundamental obligation to be a positive force in the wider world.

The Future of Journalism and the Ownership of the Press

In his concluding reflections, Bloom discussed the state of modern journalism and the decline of objective reporting. He maintained that true objectivity is an illusion, as every story is shaped by a point of view and often influenced by the corporate and advertising interests of the media outlet. He noted that in many regional and local publications, critical investigative reporting has been replaced by "boosterism"—an unceasingly positive portrayal of the community designed to keep advertisers happy and avoid controversy.

Despite the downsizing of newsrooms and the loss of competition in the newspaper industry, Bloom expressed a sense of optimism about the rise of independent media and blogging. He argued that for the first time, individuals can "own their own press," allowing for the transmission of contrary views that would otherwise be suppressed by establishment media. This is particularly vital in an era where "crooked politicians" and unethical businessmen can operate with less scrutiny due to the decline of traditional investigative journalism. Bloom emphasized that the core mission of journalism remains to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," a task that requires the courage to report the truth regardless of the consequences.

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